

Chapter 4

Christians: their crimes and punishments from Nero to Domitian

4.1. Introduction

At this point it is useful to compare my findings about the *fiscus Judaicus* under Domitian with the current ideas on the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, in order to integrate them. For this purpose I will focus on the earliest stages of the Roman persecution. The period under consideration is roughly the one between the Roman governors Gallio, *proconsul* of the province of Achaia in the early fifties of the first century, and Pliny, *legatus Augusti* of Bithynia-Pontus in *ca.* 112. The case brought against the Jew Paul by other Jews in Corinth concerning Paul's instruction of non-Jews, was dismissed by Gallio as something which should be sorted out by Jews amongst themselves.²⁵³ Some sixty years later Pliny had 'Christians' executed after they confessed they were indeed 'Christians'.²⁵⁴ Gallio found no crimes he could prosecute; sixty years later Pliny could find no other crime than the *nomen* itself, the crime of being a Christian.

So it may be concluded that during this period there was (from a Roman perspective) a significant shift from regarding 'Christianity' as a Jewish movement with non-Jewish sympathizers, which did not really present a different picture from Judaism as a whole, to regarding it as a separate religion that was not to be tolerated within the Roman Empire.

In his article from 1963 ('Why were the early Christians persecuted?'), which can still be called 'the best modern analysis of the problem'²⁵⁵, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix distinguishes three phases in the history of Roman persecution of Christians:

The first ends just before the great fire at Rome in 64; the second begins with the persecution which followed the fire and continues until 250; and the third opens with the persecution under Decius in 250-1 and lasts until 313 – or, if we take account of the anti-Christian activities of Licinius in his later years, until the defeat of

²⁵³ Acts 18.12-17.

²⁵⁴ Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96-97.

²⁵⁵ Bremmer 2002, 107.

Licinius by Constantine in 324. We know of no persecution by the Roman government until 64, and there was no general persecution until that of Decius.²⁵⁶

The second phase (from 64 until 250) as defined in this citation is the most important one for this chapter. Ste. Croix admits that the ‘earliest stages of intervention on the part of the government, before about 112, are particularly obscure to us’.²⁵⁷ This is precisely the period I would like to take a closer look at.

Looking back to the results that were found in the previous chapter, it may be concluded that there is need for an important adjustment of the second phase as defined by Ste. Croix. It should be divided into two sub-phases: one (2a) from 64 until 96 and the second (2b) from 96 until 250. For the latter phase (2b) the analysis of Ste. Croix firmly stands, but for the earlier period (2a: from 64 until 96) one important aspect is missing: the distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Ste. Croix introduces the term ‘licensed atheists’ for Jews in the Roman Empire²⁵⁸, but he does not raise the question of when Jewish Christians went over from the category ‘licensed’ to ‘illegal’. In the previous chapter it was mentioned that this was probably under Nerva in the year 96: at that moment the status of Jewish Christians in the Roman Empire changed from Jewish to ‘non-Jewish’, leading to a change in legal status from ‘licensed atheists’ to ‘illegal atheists’.²⁵⁹ This is the situation that is found in Pliny’s letter (in which no distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians is found) and this also explains the execution of the Jewish Christian Simeon, bishop of Jerusalem, around the same time (also during Trajan’s reign), as seen in the previous chapter. Before Nerva’s reform of the *fiscus Judaicus* in the year 96 Jewish Christians could still be regarded as Jews and thus as ‘licensed atheists’, which is something one should bear in mind when looking at this period.

In studying the period from 64 to 96 (‘phase 2a’), I suggest special attention is paid to two aspects: (1) the use of the word ‘Christian’ in both

²⁵⁶ Ste. Croix 1963, 6-7.

²⁵⁷ Ste. Croix 1963, 7; Sherwin-White (1964, 23) is of the opinion that ‘Ste. Croix’s method is to begin at the end and to work backwards, and inevitably his treatment of the period before Hadrian is less satisfactory’. The criticism that Sherwin-White brings forward in this respect, however, is successfully countered by Ste. Croix 1964. On persecution in general: Frend 1965.

²⁵⁸ Ste. Croix 1963, 25.

²⁵⁹ See also pp. 86-88.

Roman and Christian sources and most importantly (2) the distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians in relation to the persecutions. Three successive moments in time can be distinguished: (I) the persecution under Nero in Rome (Chapter 4.2), (II) the circumstances as described in the First Letter of Peter, which can be dated to the Flavian era, but before the persecution by Domitian (Chapter 4.3), and (III) the persecution under Domitian by means of the *fiscus Judaicus* (Chapter 4.4, which will make use of my basic findings in Chapter 2). At the end of this chapter I will present a table in which the phases as proposed by Ste. Croix will return with the inclusion of my ‘sub-phases’.

4.2. The persecution under Nero

Our most important source for the first known persecution of Christians by Roman authorities is Tacitus, who links this persecution to the fire of Rome during the reign of Nero in 64, which devastated a great part of the city.²⁶⁰ The cause of the fire was not certain according to Tacitus: it may have been an accident or it was ordered by Nero.²⁶¹ In Tacitus’ account of the punishment of Christians there seems to be a considerable amount of time between the fire and the arrests and subsequent executions. First Nero has his new palace (*domus*) built and at the same time major rebuilding takes place in the rest of the city.²⁶² Then it reads:

The next thing (*mox*) was to seek means of propitiating the gods, and recourse was had to the Sibylline books, by the direction of which prayers were offered to Vulcanus, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno, too, was entreated by the matrons, first, in the Capitol, then on the nearest part of the coast, whence water was procured to sprinkle the fane and image of the goddess. And there were sacred banquets and nightly vigils celebrated by married women. But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt

²⁶⁰ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.38-44

²⁶¹ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.38.

²⁶² *Annals* 15.42-43. Based on this account it could even be concluded that the punishment of Christians took place a number of years later: 66 or 67. When reading that ‘Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle’, one may assume that these were the gardens belonging to his new *domus*. All of this gives an impression of a ‘festive’ ceremony celebrating the end of the rebuilding activities.

and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace (*quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat*). Christ, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition (*exitiabilis superstitio*), thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil (*originem eius mali*), but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind (*odio humani generis*). Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed. (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44)

The important elements in this account are Tacitus' description of Christians and the fact that their persecution is closely linked to the crime of incendiarism. According to Tacitus, Christians were hated by the populace (*vulgus*) of Rome because of alleged crimes (*flagitia*), which he does not specify. He calls Christianity a 'mischievous superstition', an 'evil', and thinks Christians are 'criminals', who deserve 'extreme and exemplary punishment'. Furthermore, he mentions two groups of punished Christians: a first group of people that pleaded guilty to the crime of incendiarism²⁶³ and a

²⁶³ Ste. Croix 1963, 32 n. 11, claims that '*qui fatebantur*', relating to the first group, should be interpreted as a confession of Christianity and not of incendiarism. This is also the opinion of Keresztes 1980, 250-1, who adds that this is shared 'by the overwhelming majority of modern authors' (251). It probably makes more sense to have one (small) group pleading guilty to the crime of incendiarism (very likely after having been tortured) and another (much larger) group being convicted on the grounds of 'a wider "complex of guilt"' (a term used by Ste. Croix 1963, 8). Also Freudenberg 1967, 181, notes: 'Es ist aber ebenso gut möglich dass sie die Brandstiftungen bekannten.' Ste. Croix tries to backdate the

large second group ('an immense multitude') that was arrested on the information of the first, who were not directly guilty of the fire but were apparently prosecuted for their 'hatred of mankind', probably because similar crimes could be expected from them and these should be prevented at all cost.

Suetonius, our next early second century source, also mentions the persecution of Christians by Nero, but he does not give any context other than 'during his reign many abuses were severely punished and put down'. This becomes obvious when reading the entire passage in which this appears:

During his reign many abuses were severely punished and put down, and no fewer new laws were made: a limit was set to expenditures; the public banquets were confined to a distribution of food; the sale of any kind of cooked viands in the taverns was forbidden, with the exception of pulse and vegetables, whereas before every sort of dainty was exposed for sale. Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition (*Afflicti supplicii Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae*). He put an end to the diversions of the chariot drivers, who from immunity of long standing claimed the right of ranging at large and amusing themselves by cheating and robbing the people. The pantomimic actors and their partisans were banished from the city. (Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2)

Suetonius only needs one sentence to tell his readers about the punishment of Christians under Nero, followers of a 'new and mischievous superstition'. He does not link the punishment to any specific crime, like Tacitus does: Suetonius blames Nero for the fire of 64 and does not tell his readers about any attempt by the emperor to put the blame on others.²⁶⁴ Being followers of this 'new and mischievous superstition' was enough of a crime committed

charge of 'being a Christian' as far back as he can (Ste. Croix 1963, 9), to give his second phase (from 64 to 250) a more uniform character. I think this is not possible in view of the evidence provided by Tacitus. After all: if Nero wanted to put the blame of the fire on Christians, he must have executed his victims on the basis of their being guilty of arson. This implies that some of them pleaded guilty to this crime. This must be true for at least the first group of arrested Christians, after which other Christians could be arrested as well.

²⁶⁴ Suetonius, *Nero* 38: *incendit urbem* ('he set fire to the city'). Also Pliny the Elder (*Hist. Nat.* 17.1.5) and Cassius Dio (*Hist. Rom.* 62.16) put the blame on Nero.

by Christians in the eyes of Suetonius, so it seems.²⁶⁵ This was actually the case when Suetonius wrote this account (which was after the date of Pliny's letter to Trajan), but backdating this to the days of Nero seems problematic. Some kind of 'criminal' connection to the fire seems more likely.

Looking at the accounts of Tacitus and Suetonius it can be observed that both writers use the word *Christiani* to refer to the followers of this 'superstitio' in the days of Nero, which implies that this name was already in use in Rome around the year 64. In this respect Horrell can be followed when he concludes:

It is possible that Tacitus is guilty of anachronism here, but his rather deliberate statement, combined with the evidence from Acts (...) and the indications that the name was known across the empire by the end of the century, seems to support the conclusion that the name was indeed used by, or before, 64.²⁶⁶

The origin and early use of the word 'Christian' (Latin: *Christianus*, Greek: Χριστιανός) have been frequently studied. It is generally accepted that it originated as a label given by outsiders relatively early (perhaps even between 40 and 50)²⁶⁷, but its use in the first century is still extremely rare.²⁶⁸ In the account by Tacitus 'Christians' is also used by outsiders, in this case by the 'populace' (*vulgus*) of Rome, to refer to this group of people.

²⁶⁵ Concerns about strange religions and illegal associations had always been great in the city of Rome. See, e.g., Cotter 1996.

²⁶⁶ Horrell 2007, 366. In Acts 11.26 one of only three New Testament occurrences of the word is found: 'it was in Antioch that the disciples were first (πρώτως) called "Christians"'. In Luke's account this can be dated to the period 40-50.

²⁶⁷ Horrell 2007, 364: 'there is a good deal to be said for the thesis that it was first coined in Latin, in the sphere of the Roman administration, arising from the encounter between Christianity and the imperial regime (in the provinces?)'. Horrell's article contains the most recent summary regarding the origins of the term 'Christian' (362-7). See also Elliott 2000, 789-794 (in his commentary on 1 Pet 4.16), Bremmer 2002, 103-108, and Hegedus 2004. For a widely differing view, see C. and A. Faivre 2008.

²⁶⁸ In the New Testament it is only found three times: Acts 11.26; 26.28; 1 Pet 4.16. Furthermore, Josephus uses it once (*Ant.* 18.64: 'and even now the tribe of the Christians – named after him - has not disappeared'). This is part of the disputed *Testimonium Flavianum*, but I regard this sentence and also the notion of Josephus that this 'tribe' consisted of Jews and Greeks (occurring in the same passage, see also note 295), as genuine (cf. Meier 1991, 64-66). These four occurrences of 'Christian' or 'Christians', belong to the first century. In the early second century it is used rather frequently by the Christian writer Ignatius (*Eph.* 11.2; *Magn.* 4.1; *Trall.* 6.1; *Rom.* 3.2) and, as seen, it is found once with

I now turn to the question whether there is any relevance in distinguishing between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians in relation to the Neronian persecution. Peter Lampe brings a number of useful insights to this issue when he places Nero's measures against Christians in a Roman legal framework.²⁶⁹ Following the account of Tacitus, Lampe is of the opinion that Nero was looking for victims he could blame for the fire in Rome to stop the rumour that he himself 'ordered' this fire to make space for his megalomaniac building plans. The punishments that were subsequently given to these alleged arsonists seem to be less random than is often assumed.²⁷⁰ Moreover, they can give more information about the legal status of the people involved. Tacitus writes that Christians were covered in skins of wild animals and after that killed and maimed by dogs. This was a possible punishment for murderers (in this case regarding the victims of the fire as having been murdered). Furthermore, one reads that other Christians were used as 'torches', a punishment (being burnt alive) that was given to arsonists. The third form of punishment that Tacitus informs us about is crucifixion.

Lampe cautiously suggests that no Roman citizens would have been sentenced to any of these three types of execution, because they would not have been applied to citizens. Since many Jews in Rome possessed Roman citizenship, he concludes that most or all of the punished Christians must have been non-Jews.²⁷¹

The reason for the presence of a distinctly visible group of Christians with a pagan background in Rome could perhaps be explained by the expulsion of Jews from Rome in the year 49 under Claudius.²⁷² If all Jews (including

Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44), once with Suetonius (*Nero* 16.2), both referring to the persecutions under Nero, and it is used of course by Pliny (and the emperor Trajan), *Ep.* 10.96-97.

²⁶⁹ Lampe, 82-84.

²⁷⁰ But also see Keresztes 1980, 255 + notes: 'These punishments can in no way be used as arguments, as is so often done, to prove that the Christians were put to death for arson or, e.g., for "magic"'. Keresztes gives no further arguments for this statement, but he is also of the opinion (like Ste. Croix) that *qui fatebantur* should be read as a confession to being Christians and not as a confession to the crime of arson (see also note 263).

²⁷¹ Lampe 82-83.

²⁷² Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.3-4. Again I will give the full passage in which it appears, to show the way Suetonius reports this:

'He [Claudius] allowed the people of Ilium perpetual exemption from tribute, on the ground that they were the founders of the Roman race, reading an ancient letter of the senate and people of

Jewish Christians) were expelled because of the unrest caused by ‘Chrestus’ (or rather discussions and confrontations about ‘the Christ’, as is often assumed), groups of non-Jewish Christians probably remained in Rome, since they were not hit by this decision. When Nero became Roman emperor in 54, Jews were allowed to return to the city, but it is not hard to imagine that tensions arose between the existing Gentile Christian community and any returning Jewish Christians. Paul’s letter to the Romans certainly points in the direction of strong tensions between these two subgroups within Christianity, which can be dated to the period after 54. It becomes clear that Jewish Christians apparently formed a minority group within the Christian community in Rome. Furthermore, it is highly likely that the criticism of the pagan populace of Rome would be primarily focused against the ex-pagan members of the Christian community.

Lampe has built a probable case in which mainly Gentile Christians were the victims.²⁷³ Even if he is right, and I am willing to follow him in his reconstruction, this does not necessarily imply that Romans were able to distinguish clearly between Jews and Christians in Rome in the days of Nero. It may only be concluded that they were apparently able to distinguish between the different categories of sympathizers with Judaism (some of

Rome written in Greek to king Seleucus, in which they promised him their friendship and alliance only on condition that he should keep their kinsfolk of Ilium free from every burden. Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome (*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*). He allowed the envoys of the Germans to sit in the orchestra, led by their naïve self-confidence; for when they had been taken to the seats occupied by the common people and saw the Parthian and Armenian envoys sitting with the senate, they moved of their own accord to the same part of the theatre, protesting that their merits and rank were no whit inferior.’

This report of the expulsion, including the connection with an inner Jewish conflict about Jesus as the Messiah (Christ), is usually found to be corroborated by Acts 18.2: ‘There he [Paul] found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome’. The connection between Claudius’ expulsion of Jews from Rome and early Christianity is not accepted by all scholars; see, e.g., Gruen 2002, 38-41. Also see Spence 2004, 65-112, who strongly and convincingly argues in favour of this connection.

²⁷³ Lampe 2003, 82-4.

whom they called Christians), something which Gallio was not able or willing to do only some 15 years earlier.²⁷⁴

If Jewish Christians were also executed under Nero, which cannot be ruled out by any means, then the link with an alleged crime must certainly have existed, because Jewish Christians were first of all Jews in the eyes of the Romans before they were Christians. Their being Jewish must still have been the best protection from any ‘religious’ persecution at that moment in time. In their case a conviction solely on the basis of being followers of a ‘mischievous superstition’ or because of ‘hatred of mankind’, is hardly likely. They still belonged to the group of ‘licensed atheists’ and at this point in time it would be impossible to describe their legal position in general as different from other Jews.

We do know about the executions of the Jews Peter and Paul under Nero, through the account of Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 2.25). The New Testament is virtually silent on this, although most of its books were written after Nero. It is possible that their executions were linked to the charge of incendiarism as well, but perhaps one could also think of the edict of Claudius ‘to the rest of the world’ for the charges against them, and assume that they violated the condition ‘not to show contempt of the religious observances of other nations’ in the eyes of the Romans at that moment in time.²⁷⁵ It was already noted that this conclusion about the Jewish-Christian mission was not yet drawn by Gallio²⁷⁶, but it is possible that in the days of Nero a few active Jewish missionaries of the Christian message, held responsible for the presence of a large group of non-Jewish Christians (illegal ‘atheists’) in the capital of the empire, were executed in Rome.

Nero still needed the false charge of a real crime to persecute Christians, but could apparently take advantage of the fact that they already had a bad name among the populace of Rome, who were thus more ready to believe Christians started the fire. Although Tacitus ascribes the crime of ‘hatred of mankind’ to the second group that was arrested, the initial link to the alleged crime of arson is all important. The same elements that eventually made being a Christian in itself a punishable crime under Trajan and Pliny, very likely already played a role in Nero’s days as well. Picking out Christians as his victims was probably no random choice for the emperor in that respect.

²⁷⁴ Acts 18.12-17; see also pp. 51-55.

²⁷⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 19.290.

²⁷⁶ Acts 18.12-17; see pp. 51-55.

Especially those Christians who were not Jewish and could not claim the right to the Jewish privilege of monotheism could immediately be seen (by people living close to them: the *vulgus* mentioned by Tacitus) as people who had turned their backs to Roman society by distancing themselves from the Roman gods. Their behaviour could disturb the *pax deorum*²⁷⁷, jeopardizing the well-being of the Roman state and its citizens, which probably led Tacitus to accuse the Christians of ‘hatred of mankind’. Concerns about strange religions and illegal associations had always been great in the city of Rome.²⁷⁸ Thus, even if the accusation of incendiarism was false (but still necessary for persecution in the days of Nero), the execution of these Christians as such was justified anyway according to Tacitus.²⁷⁹

4.3. 1 Peter

After having taken a look at the short persecution of Christians by Nero, which only took place in Rome, I will now turn to a letter, which became part of the New Testament: the First Letter of Peter (1 Peter). This short letter is important for two reasons: it was exclusively written to Gentile Christians, as I shall explain, and it will be argued that it can be dated somewhere between the persecution of Christians by Nero and the harsh administration of the Jewish tax under Domitian, thus leading to the conclusion that during this period in time primarily Gentile Christians, as expagans, were suffering from verbal harassment by people living close to them. This was the general situation of Gentile Christians within the Roman Empire, until the moment both groups of Christians (both Gentile and Jewish) became targets of prosecution by the *fiscus Judaicus*. This will be studied in more detail below.

4.3.1. *The addressees as Gentile Christians*

I will start by observing that this letter was written to Gentile Christians (expagans) in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, to exhort them to remain steadfast in their faith, despite the strong hostility they were

²⁷⁷ Note the first sentence of Tacitus, *Annal.* 15.44: ‘the next thing was to seek means of propitiating the gods’.

²⁷⁸ See also note 265.

²⁷⁹ Tacitus, *Annal.* 15.44: ‘criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment’.

experiencing in their daily lives.²⁸⁰ A number of key passages seem to leave no room for any doubt in this respect.

Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. (1 Peter 1.14-20)

In this passage the members of these Christian communities are given the message that they 'were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [their] ancestors' and they should not return to 'the desires' that they 'formerly had in ignorance'. This can only have been directed towards Gentile Christians. The following later verses confirm this impression:

You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. (1 Peter 4.3-4)

The words 'they are surprised that you no longer join them', clearly point to the fact that becoming a Christian had brought about a complete break with their previous practices for these people, who apparently had a pagan background. They had adopted a new lifestyle in which there was no longer place for close social intercourse with former friends and relatives who had

²⁸⁰ Under the heading 'Audience: Gentile Christians' Ramsey Michaels 1988, xlv-xlvi, concludes that 'there is near consensus that 1 Peter was in fact directed to a predominantly Gentile Christian audience' and rightly observes with regard to 1 Pet 4.3-5: 'such words are scarcely intelligible in relation to a Jewish Christian audience'. Cf. Feldmeier 2008, 42. On the other hand, Elliott 2000, 95-96, still presumes an 'ethnically mixed audience', but his arguments are not persuasive. The fact that there are numerous references 'drawn from Israel's Scripture and tradition' in this letter, only confirms that these Gentile Christians had substituted the 'futile ways' (1 Pet 1.18) inherited from their ancestors by Jewish traditions.

not joined the Christian community and certainly no place for the worship of other gods ('lawless idolatry'). Again in the background the words of Tacitus about people going over the Jewish religion can be heard (words that were applicable to full proselytes but also to Gentile Christians, as I explained earlier).²⁸¹ According to Tacitus they were taught:

to despise all gods (*contemnere deos*), to disown their country (*exuere patriam*), and set at nought parents, children, and brothers (*parentes liberos fratres vilia habere*). (Tacitus, *Historiae* 5.5.2)

The only advice that could be given to these Gentile Christians was to do 'honourable deeds', so they would silence the criticism of those people (called 'Gentiles' in this letter) who maligned them as 'evildoers':

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor. (1 Peter 2.11-17)

This is the passage that also contains the call to accept the authority of the emperor and his governors. As long as only good deeds were done and no crimes were involved, the addressees need not fear these authorities, since the emperor sent his governors 'to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right'. The important conclusion that can be drawn from this document is that being a Christian was not yet a punishable crime that could be brought before a Roman judge.²⁸² Yet people did suffer as 'Christians',

²⁸¹ See also pp. 42-43 and 49.

²⁸² For this reason this letter cannot be dated to Trajan's reign, as is sometimes suggested (e.g., Downing 1988).

In this respect I fully agree with Elliott 2000, 103:

as is also clear from the next passage, but they should make sure they could not be associated with any real criminal activities.

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief-maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian (ὡς Χριστιανός), do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. (1 Peter 4.13-16)

In this passage there is one of the three occurrences of the word ‘Christian’ in the New Testament. Also in this passage the word seems to be a label used by outsiders for this group of people.²⁸³ As long as they committed no real crimes, these Gentile Christians should not be ashamed of themselves, according to the writer of this letter. Furthermore, they were told that they were not the only ones who were suffering:

Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering (1 Peter 5.8-9)

From this last passage one learns that the addressees are exhorted to remain ‘steadfast’ in their faith, despite the external pressure they are experiencing in their daily lives. It is no surprise to read that ‘your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering’. Whereas it was no big deal to add gods or deities to one’s personal pantheon in

In sum, the manner in which Christian suffering is mentioned, described and addressed in this letter points not to organized Roman persecution as its cause but to local social tensions deriving from the social, cultural, and religious differences demarcating believers from their neighbours. It is not the punitive actions of Roman authorities, but those of alienated (4:4), suspicious (2:15; 3:15), slanderous (2:12; 3:16), and hostile (3:9, 13) local populations that 1 Peter describes. Such popular oppositions could conceivably lead to hearings and official trials. 1 Peter, however, makes no mention of such trials.

Also Ramsey Michaels 1988, lxiii, concludes: ‘the actual abuse of Christians with which he [i.e. the writer of 1 Peter] seems most concerned is verbal abuse (e.g., 2:12, 15, 23; 3:9, 16; 4:4, 14b).’

²⁸³ Horrell 2007, 362, concludes: ‘this text represents the earliest witness to the crucial process whereby the term was transformed from a hostile label applied by outsiders to a proudly claimed self-designation.’

antiquity, it was apparently a fundamental step to go over to a religion that worshiped only one god with the exclusion of all others. This led to the alienation that can be felt throughout this letter: the members of these communities were living like strangers and exiles. This situation was very real for the Gentile Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, but their ex-pagan ‘brothers and sisters’ elsewhere in the Roman Empire no doubt experienced similar circumstances.

4.3.2. *Date of 1 Peter*

The letter was probably written at some point between the years 70 and 85.²⁸⁴ This can be concluded from the use of the term ‘Babylon’ for Rome (1 Pet 5.13), which points to a date after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, i.e. after the year 70. Considering the year 85 as the *terminus ante quem*, is based on my conclusion that the harsh exaction of the Jewish tax started around this year.²⁸⁵ In this document there is no proof for a real persecution of Christians, whether Gentile or Jewish. Apparently this was still something of the (very near?) future. Linking this letter to the situation under Pliny, which has been done in the past, seems impossible for this reason, because in Pliny’s case it is certain that Christians were executed.²⁸⁶

Intriguingly there is room for the assumption that in this letter there is a reference to the *fiscus Judaicus* as the possible source of persecution that is threatening Christian communities. For this assumption one needs to take a closer look at 1 Pet 5.9: ‘for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering’; in Greek: εἰδότες τὰ αὐτὰ τῶν παθημάτων τῆ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ὑμῶν ἀδελφότητι ἐπιτελείσθαι. In Greek the word ἐπιτελείσθαι is used, which could have the

²⁸⁴ Ramsey Michaels 1988, lxii-lxvii, prefers a date after the year 70 and before Domitian: ‘a date between 70 and 80’ (lxiii); Elliott 2000, 135-138, concludes: ‘The combination of the relevant factors involving both external and internal evidence, in sum, favors a dating of 1 Peter sometime in the period between 73 and 92 CE.’ (138); Feldmeier (2008, 40) prefers ‘the early period of Domitian (between 81 and 90)’.

²⁸⁵ See pp. 22-24.

²⁸⁶ See, e.g., Downing 1988, who links 1 Peter, Revelation and Pliny’s letter to Trajan to each other. These documents should be regarded in chronological order and their individual circumstances differ from each other. Also Keresztes 1980, 257, wrongly concludes that being a Christian is regarded as a capital crime in 1 Peter. Horrell 2007, 370-376, is somewhat more cautious, but he also sees a number of important similarities between the circumstances in 1 Peter and Pliny’s letter to Trajan.

meaning of ‘paying a tax in full’.²⁸⁷ This changes the translation of this verse into: ‘for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are paying the same tax of suffering’. When Elliott treats this passage he notes: ‘The economic metaphor of “paying a *tax* (or *meed*) of suffering,” however, is alien to this letter, which makes no mention of taxes, either figuratively or literally’,²⁸⁸ but it may be objected that this economic metaphor was probably not alien to the historical circumstances in which this letter was written. If this metaphor *is* used as a reference to the *fiscus Judaicus*, this might be explained as an indication that the pressure to use this as an instrument to also prosecute Gentile Christians was growing, both in Rome and the provinces.

Possibly the letter was even written at a moment when the prosecutions against Jewish Christians had already started. In this case the readers would have been familiar with those circumstances, also for Jewish Christians, and may have understood the metaphor, even if there is no further mention of taxes in this letter. The writer of the letter is still of the opinion that being a Christian in itself will not lead to prosecutions and convictions before a Roman court of law, as long as real crimes have not been committed. As soon as the crime of ‘living a Jewish life *improfessus*’ had been introduced, however, this turned out to be the one that could be prosecuted by the *fiscus Judaicus* and this would also lead to convictions of Gentile Christians.

One may safely assume that this letter was written between the persecutions of Christians by Nero and Domitian, probably around the time the latter began. Looking back from a third century perspective, Tertullian may have concluded that the persecution of Christians was ‘founded’ by Nero (*institutum Neronianum*)²⁸⁹, but from the perspective of the writer of 1 Peter, this Neronian persecution may still have been a horrible local incident under a cruel emperor, to which he makes no clear reference in his letter.²⁹⁰ After all, this persecution was very much confined in space (only the city of Rome) and time (hardly more than a few weeks). And yet the writer’s

²⁸⁷ *LSJ* 665, ἐπιτελέω III *pay in full*;

²⁸⁸ Elliott 2000, 861-862, also for the full discussion of ἐπιτελεῖσθαι. See also Ramsey Michaels 1988, 301-302, who dismisses the suggestion that this is a ‘subtle metaphor’ as well. Neither writer refers to the *fiscus Judaicus* as the possible subject of the metaphor.

²⁸⁹ Tertullian, *Ad. Nat.* 1.7; Ste. Croix 1963, 14, notes: ‘Tertullian’s notorious reference to an “institutum Neronianum” does not refer to a general edict: “institutum” is not a technical term, and we must translate: “the practice adopted by Nero”.’ See also Barnes 1968, 34-35.

²⁹⁰ Elliott 2000, 98-99.

persistent warning not to get involved in any real criminal activities may stem from the fact that Nero's persecution was actually based on the charge of a real crime, even if in this case it was a false accusation.

On the basis of this letter as a whole it may also be concluded that being a Christian was not yet a crime that could be successfully prosecuted before a Roman court of law at the moment the letter was written, but one does get the impression that the readiness to report non-Jewish Christians to the authorities as 'evildoers' was great. The only thing needed was a charge that would stand up in court and would be acknowledged by the proper authorities. These empire-wide circumstances were provided by the *fiscus Judaicus* under Domitian, probably already hinted at by the writer of 1 Peter (in 5.9). That these circumstances were indeed the same for all Christians in the empire is corroborated in the very same passage: 'for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are paying the same tax of suffering'.

4.4. The persecution under Domitian

Now I will turn to the harsh exaction of the Jewish tax by the *fiscus Judaicus* under Domitian, which I concluded took place in the years between 85 and 96, and hit both Jewish and non-Jewish Christians.²⁹¹ Jewish Christians may well have been among those Jews who were prosecuted for tax evasion and non-Jewish Christians could certainly have been among those charged with leading a Jewish life *improfessi* and found guilty of 'atheism' or 'contempt of the gods', possibly facing execution on these grounds.

The conclusion that Romans could clearly distinguish between Jews and Christians since the time of Nero, has played a prominent role in the study of the Roman persecution of Christians until now. This is the main reason why many scholars seem to think that the explicit mentioning of Christians in our sources is needed to underpin any persecution of them under Domitian. Smallwood and Jones are perfect examples of this approach and in this way Christians are almost automatically excluded as victims of the Flavian emperor, even despite the fact that Jewish Christians are frequently mentioned as possible victims of the *fiscus Judaicus*.²⁹² Thus there seems to be a time gap between the emperors Nero and Trajan, in which Christians were not persecuted, despite the early Christian reports about persecutions

²⁹¹ See Chapters 2 and 3 for these conclusions.

²⁹² See pp. 35; 59-60.

under the emperor Domitian. I think this gap can be filled with information from 1 Peter and the administration of the *fiscus Judaicus* under Domitian.

When looking back to the Neronian persecution of Christians, one gets a strong impression that it mainly affected Gentile Christians and hardly any Jewish Christians. With regard to this persecution, the connection to a real crime like arson that was allegedly committed by Christians is very likely.

Gentile Christians were the anomalous group in the capital of the empire, presenting a real menace to traditional Roman values. This impression is strongly confirmed by the First Letter of Peter that can be dated between 70 and 85, probably close to the latter year. From this letter it can be concluded that throughout the Roman Empire particularly non-Jewish Christians were in a difficult position and suffered verbal abuse ‘as Christians’, because they had turned away from their former religious beliefs and lifestyles.

From the perspective of local populations and Roman authorities, Jewish Christians were probably still regarded as Jews. This assumption is confirmed by the situation under Domitian. During the reign of this emperor the distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians appears to have been a very important factor. In this respect it is not surprising that the word ‘Christian’ is not found in the short account of Suetonius about the *fiscus Judaicus*.²⁹³ Apart from the fact that not only Christians were prosecuted (but, e.g., also apostate Jews), it was found that Jewish Christians were prosecuted as Jewish tax evaders and non-Jewish Christians could be convicted and even executed as ‘atheists’ on a charge of ‘living a Jewish life *improfessi*’. The punishment that both categories shared was the confiscation of their property in case of a conviction.

As noted before, the decisive criterion in these cases was membership of the Jewish *gens* (established by a circumcision test), which explicitly stressed the distinction between the Jewish and Gentile members of Christian communities.²⁹⁴ The awareness that these communities consisted

²⁹³ Suetonius, *Dom* 12.2. The other passage by Suetonius, in which he does not use the word Christian, but which is usually regarded as having a link to Christianity, is about the expulsion of Jews from Rome by Claudius in the year 49 (Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4, see note 272). Horrell 2007, 366, note 25, assumes on the basis of this passage that the word ‘Christian’ had not been coined yet in the year 49, since Suetonius does not use it here. But he does not need to mention this specific label in this ultra-short message of only seven words, since he ‘only’ describes a punishment of Jews by the emperor Claudius because of some internal conflict that apparently threatened public order in Rome.

²⁹⁴ See, e.g., Friesen (2006, 141-144), who concludes that ‘Jew’, ‘Israel’, and ‘Christian’ are not ‘appropriate terms’ (143) for the movement as described by John in his Revelation.

of both ‘Jews’ and ‘Greeks’, can also be found in the work of Flavius Josephus, who wrote in the early nineties of the first century under Domitian in Rome.²⁹⁵

Under Nerva, however, the legal distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish members of mixed Christian communities disappeared and this would never be an issue again. All of these Christians could now be prosecuted as ‘Christians’, now that Jewish Christians, at least those who were not official taxpayers of the Jewish tax to the *fiscus Judaicus*, were no longer regarded as Jews (who were the only ones entitled to an exclusive monotheism)²⁹⁶. From the sacrifice test that was used for non-Jews under the emperor Domitian, and with respect to Christians in general by Pliny under the emperor Trajan, it may be inferred that the underlying crime was ‘atheism’. This crime was so firmly connected to Christians (and apparently only to them!), that confessing to be a Christian, after having been denounced by a *delator*, was enough to be sentenced to the death penalty in the Roman Empire after Nerva.

The use of the word Christian as a self-designation is not attested before the first decade of the second century, when Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, is the first writer to use it in this way (he was executed *ca.* 108).²⁹⁷ In the same period the words ‘I am a Christian’ (*sum Christianus* or εἶμι Χριστιανός) had become a confession that could directly lead to one’s execution (under Pliny in Bithynia-Pontus, *ca.* 112), which is also the first moment that being a Christian is clearly considered to be a crime in itself by the Roman authorities.²⁹⁸ Ignatius is also the first writer to oppose Judaism and

²⁹⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 18.63-64: ‘he [Jesus] gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin.’ This is part of the disputed *Testimonium Flavianum* about Jesus. Mason 2003a, 235, writes about this passage: ‘The vast majority of commentators hold a middle position between authenticity and inauthenticity, claiming that Josephus wrote *something* about Jesus that was subsequently edited by Christian copyists.’ The remark about Jewish and Greek followers of Jesus has hardly ever been found to be suspect by this ‘vast majority of commentators’. This is also true for the closing remark of Josephus in this passage about Jesus: ‘and even now the tribe of the Christians - named after him - has not disappeared’. See also note 268 about the use of the word ‘Christian’ in this passage.

²⁹⁶ This is why I posit that the conditions that prevailed in the second phase of the Roman persecutions of Christians as defined by Ste. Croix (1963, 6-7), were created in 96 under Nerva and not under Nero in the sixties of the first century, at which point in time there was still a legal distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians.

²⁹⁷ Ignatius, *Eph.* 11.2; *Magn.* 4.1; *Trall.* 6.1; *Rom.* 3.2.

²⁹⁸ See also Appendix 1 in Bremmer 2002, 103-108: ‘Why did Jesus’ followers call themselves “Christians”?’

Christianity, using (or perhaps even coining) the word Χριστιανισμός.²⁹⁹ By doing this he seems to regard both religions as separate, whereas before his days this had not been done in such a clear way.³⁰⁰ This seems proof of the fact that the process of separation between Judaism, as a legal religion, and Christianity, as an illegal religion, strongly accelerated after Nerva's reform of the *fiscus Judaicus*. In the last chapter (Chapter 8) I will fully focus on the issue of the 'Parting of the Ways' between Judaism and Christianity and the role of the *fiscus Judaicus* in this respect.

Scheme 1 on the next page gives an overview of the characteristics of each of the three phases in the history of Roman persecution of Christians.

²⁹⁹ Ignatius, *Magn.* 10.1; 10.3; *Phld.* 6.1; *Rom.* 3.3;

³⁰⁰ One could even argue that Christians wanted to be regarded as part of Judaism by the Romans, enjoying the same privileges as Judaism in general; at least that seems to be the strategy of the writer of Luke-Acts. See, e.g., Mason 2003a, 251-295, who very convincingly argues that Luke had the same aim for Christianity that Josephus had for Judaism in writing his works: 'they [Josephus and Luke] must show that their groups are worthy of respect because, contrary to first impressions, they are well established in remotest antiquity, possess enviable moral codes, and pose no threat to Roman order' (273). In this context it may be concluded that Josephus had the easier task. Also see Mason 2003b.

Scheme 1. Accusations (A.) and Punishments (P.)

Phase 1: before the year 64 there is no knowledge of persecution of Christians by Roman authorities (which is the first phase as proposed by Ste. Croix).

Phase 2a (as proposed in this study and deviating from Ste. Croix):

Gentile Christians	Jewish Christians
Nero ca. 64 (only in Rome)	Nero ca. 64 (only in Rome)
A. Arson (after the great fire in Rome) P. Execution	Arson (?) / Spreading contempt of the gods (?) Execution (Peter, Paul)
Domitian ca. 85-96 (empire-wide)	Domitian ca. 85-96 (empire-wide)
A. Living a Jewish life <i>improfessus</i> ('Atheist') P. Confiscation of property and (possibly) execution	Evasion of the Jewish Tax Confiscation of property

Nerva, 96

*Reform of the fiscus Judaicus: Jewish Christians
no longer 'Jews' from a Roman legal perspective*

Phase 2b (circumstances as in phase 2 by Ste. Croix):

Christians
From Trajan onwards (second and third century up to 250)
A. Being a Christian ('Atheist') P. Execution

Phase 3 (as proposed by Ste. Croix):

Christians
From Decius to Diocletian (250-312): occasional general persecution of Christians
A. Being a Christian ('Atheist') P. Execution

Christianity becomes a *religio licita* in the year 313 under Constantine the Great.